

Don't forget child care ^[1]

If the Trudeau government truly wants to close the wage gap and encourage the participation of women in the workforce, as it says it does, it should embrace national child care and paternity leave programs.

Author: Star Editorial Board

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EXCERPTS

There's no question Prime Minister Justin Trudeau's heart is in the right place when it comes to promoting women's rights.

After all, he created Canada's first gender-parity cabinet "because it's 2015." And since then he's been beating the drum of feminist ideology to an increasingly faster tempo.

In January, for example, he highlighted pay equity, parental leave, child-care policies, gender diversity and the recruitment of women as key issues at the World Economic Forum in Davos.

Further, his government has placed "gender equality and women's empowerment" on the agenda for the Group of Seven summit of major industrialized countries that Canada is hosting in June.

And now his government is planning to introduce a gender-focused budget on Feb. 27 with investments to promote equality and bring more women into the workforce.

So far, so good. But, possibly, not nearly good enough.

What's missing from all the leaks out of Ottawa is any hint that the budget will include the two programs that studies indicate would make the biggest difference in women's lives and careers: a universal child care plan and use-it-or-lose-it paternity leave.

Instead, the budget is expected to include programs such as pay-equity legislation for employees in the federal government and federally regulated sectors to close the wage gap.

While this is a welcome and important step that will set an example for the provinces, which are responsible for labour law, it won't have a major impact on women's salaries in general. (According to Statistics Canada's most recent figures, women earn 87 cents on average for every dollar earned by men.)

Contrast that to a national child care program that study after study indicates would do the most to help women get back in the workforce, boost family incomes, improve early childhood skills for poor kids, add to government coffers, reduce child poverty — and, importantly, shrink the wage gap.

Indeed, after two years of study, a committee struck by Premier Kathleen Wynne to develop a strategy to close the wage gap reported that

committing to an affordable and publicly funded, geared-to-income child care program was the No. 1 way to achieve that goal.

Women who don't have access to affordable daycare take on more of the unpaid child care than men and have less time for paid work, the task force found.

Nor is there a downside in investing in child care. The Wynne study, for example, found that every dollar invested in child care would add \$2.47 to the Ontario economy. And Trudeau cited a study in Davos that found Canada could add \$150 billion to its economy over the next eight years if more women entered and advanced in the workforce.

Yet despite an election promise to create an "affordable, high quality, flexible and fully inclusive child care program," the Trudeau government has yet to deliver.

Indeed, if last year is any indication, this year's budget might be all talk, little action. The 2017 budget actually contained a "gender statement" that highlighted the ongoing wage gap between men and women in Canada, as well as the overrepresentation of women in lower income sectors and the low proportion of women in management and boardroom positions.

But it failed to deliver in any meaningful way on the one program — child care — that would have the biggest impact on encouraging women to enter the workforce and advance in their careers. Instead of committing to its election promise it offered up a mere \$7 billion over 10 years to open up child care spaces across the country.

Compare that to the gender parity boost Paul Martin's Liberal government promised in 2005 with a proposed investment of \$5 billion over five years to kick-start a universal child-care system. (That plan was unfortunately scuttled when the Harper government was elected in 2006.)

Now that was putting your money where your mouth is.

Almost as important in helping women shed domestic duties that hold them back in their careers is creating a dedicated leave plan for new fathers modeled on the wildly successful use-it-or-lose-it paternity leave program that Quebec has had in place since 2006.

Trudeau is well aware of the benefits. As he noted at the United Nations in 2016, such a program would lead to more gender equality and increasing opportunities for women in the workforce. And in Davos he admitted "that message of making sure there is more sharing of the responsibilities around child-rearing is something that we do have to do a better job of."

The bottom line is that studies have shown that when dads take paternity leave the gender wage gap diminishes and women make career gains.

So, by all means, the government should bring in pay-equity legislation in the upcoming budget. That will help. But if it really wants to close the wage gap and encourage the full participation and advancement of women in the workforce it would embrace universal child care and paternity leave programs.

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